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## TITLE - What is happiness and how can it be developed for application with Mental Health Nurses --Manuscript Draft--

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**TITLE - What is happiness and how can it be developed for application with Mental Health**

**Nurses**

**Author : Jan Macfarlane, Lecturer University of Bolton**

**Abstract**

This is the second article in a series of Continuing Professional Development papers that explores the meaning of positive psychology and the importance of applying the latest research findings for the wellbeing of the mental health workforce. There will be an historical outline of positive psychology showing it is not as 'new' as we might think. It sets the context and explains key terms through the underpinning theoretical work of Martin Seligman. This is followed by a contemporary lens on the topic in mental health nursing as the growing field of research shares its finding on taking the potential to the actual in making new skills via neuroplasticity. The practical element will help us to understand what happiness means to the individual and how it can be developed with evidence based user-friendly effective exercises.

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I have no conflict of interests.

## BJMHN Paper

TITLE - What is happiness and how can it be developed for application with Mental Health

### Nurses

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### Abstract

This is the second article in a series of Continuing Professional Development papers that explores the meaning of positive psychology and the importance of applying the latest research findings for the wellbeing of the mental health workforce. There will be an historical outline of positive psychology showing it is not as 'new' as we might think. It sets the context and explains key terms through the underpinning theoretical work of Martin Seligman. This is followed by a contemporary lens on the topic in mental health nursing as the growing field of research shares its finding on taking the potential to the actual in making new skills via neuroplasticity. The practical element will help us to understand what happiness means to the individual and how it can be developed with evidence based user-friendly effective exercises.

### A Brief History of Positive Psychology

The study of positive psychology might at first glance appear to be quite a modern trend that has appeared in contemporary sources over the last twenty years or so, this is not quite the

case. The words have been coined by this umbrella term for convenience and brevity. But the historical search actually extends back many years and from many varied sources. The learner may be aware of the theme of compassion and kindness in Buddhism; the teachings of Aristotle on living a virtuous life; the pursuit of happiness mentioned in the American Declaration of Independence; philosophical debate on utilitarianism through John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham on a person's actions lifting the welfare of others; and lastly the different cultural approaches and variations between the Western mindsets of freedom and personal achievement versus Eastern priorities of duty to others and prioritising the welfare of community.

It is clear that there has been up to 2,000 years of research in diagnosing and classifying illness so there is a great deal of catching up to do in researching and understanding the human race in finding out not only what is wrong but what is right with us too. Topics such as poor health, anger, divorce and mental illness crammed the library shelves but there was little in comparison about developing more robust health, happiness and compassion. To bring us swiftly to the present day and the emerging development of a rigorous scientific approach to the study of 'happiness' recognition must be given to the 'father' of Positive Psychology, Martin Seligman whose founding research with Chris Peterson, in 2004, led the way to others discovering a set of strengths that have been found to buffer against stress, illness and setbacks, thereby increasing resilience.

## What is Happiness?

The term is a very difficult one to define as it is often linked to aspects such as joy, pleasure, gratefulness, optimism and achieving goals. It can also be linked to greater meaning such as fulfilment, spirituality and contentment but the challenge lies in there not being a single universal factor. 'Don't stop me now I'm having such a good time' may be the idea of living the dream for some, alternatively, one may feel that the pursuit of it as a constant state will inevitably end with feelings of disappointment and disillusionment as this is not a realistic goal. Philosophically the question could be posed that if a happiness machine had been invented that could make a person happy by just pressing a button who would press it and why?

Peterson (2006) argues that there are definite reasons for experiencing negative emotions in that, for example, fear helps us run, anger helps us defend, disgust induces revulsion and anxiety can optimise performance. They activate the 'flight or flight' response, through the release of adrenaline and cortisol, which help us adapt for survival and can make us connect with deeper responses of learning, wisdom and coping. Positive emotions affecting our health through the endocrine system releasing oxytocin into the blood help us to become more open and nurturing to others. Both are necessary for optimal brain functioning but positive emotions allow us to make more informed decisions and provide better coping mechanisms to tackle adverse situations.

Lyubomirsky (2008) has argued that the potential for happiness lies 50% in the genes, 10-20% in terms of life circumstances e.g. health, attractiveness, events but this leaves up to

40% potential to be able to improve our happiness by choosing to cultivate the required strengths. Even if the percentages might be difficult to for us to agree on there is no doubt that each individual has a great deal of potential to work with and practice activities that will help form new neural pathways as positive emotions have great potency in helping with flexible thinking and problem solving.

### How can it be measured?

There have been a plethora of rating scales that measure anxiety and depression but few that measured 'happiness'. Increasingly, there are now various methods used to ensure robust data collection that range from observations of identified behaviours, surveys that correlate variables, longitudinal studies with predictors, specific experiments and more easily self- report scales. For the purpose of this paper and its relevance to mental health nurses this is the method that will be the most useful to explore deeper. There is agreement that there are certain techniques one can use to improve the quality of one's life and Seligman (2011) proposes his own formula which is called the PERMA model of happiness and stands for the following core elements:

*Positive Emotion* which is the key in accepting negativity as part of the human condition but increasing ways in finding positive aspects to circumstances. Developing this strength lies in practicing positive interventions such as mindfulness, gratitude and appreciation every day.

*Engagement* by being in the present and participating in activities that we feel inspired by and enjoy and finding the strength to say no to those that do not make us feel so.

*Relationships* are vital to our connection with others on a social, intellectual and emotional level. The importance of nurturing these creates strong bonds to give us the healthy supportive and caring network we all need. Prioritising quality time and being interested in others increases our sense of belonging and happiness. It also relates to reflecting on those relationships that are not healthy and considering how the interactions here can be stopped or minimised.

*Meaning* helps us consider what our contribution to the community, society and world is. It helps us to see that we are part of something much bigger than ourselves and this transcends materialism and focusses our minds on what legacy we would like to leave behind. It poses the question of how we would like to be remembered and how we can work towards this in achievable steps.

*Accomplishment/Achievements* links to feelings experienced when goals are accomplished. This sense confirms our abilities to succeed and highlights how often perseverance is required to drive us onward when difficulties arise. The more perseverance is used the resultant increase in happiness is felt.

### ACTIVITY 1

Watch the You-tube video that shows Martin Seligman explaining his model to increase your understanding of the topic ( <https://www.youtube.com/watch> ) , then complete a PERMA questionnaire to help you reflect further on the key elements – you could repeat the questionnaire throughout this series of papers /after practicing positive psychology interventions to see if and how your thoughts change ([www.permahsurvey.com](http://www.permahsurvey.com)).

More recent research for Action for Happiness ([www.actionforhappiness.org](http://www.actionforhappiness.org)) has culminated in suggesting 10 keys to Happier Living ( King, 2016) and linking it to our lives which has clear similarities with PERMA as identified below.

1. Caring about others being fundamental to happiness and contributing to a happier society
2. Strengthening relationships to provide love and support
3. Taking care of our body to improve mood as mind and body are connected
4. Noticing the world around us and appreciating it to get more out of our day
5. Trying out new things and keeping curious and engaged
6. Have goals to look forward to and challenge us to get sense of accomplishment
7. Find ways to bounce back from setbacks to learn more about resilience
8. Take a positive but realistic approach
9. Realise we are not perfect and accept kindness to ourselves
10. Be connected to something bigger that gives meaning and purpose



## ACTIVITY 2

Look again at the Keys to Happier Living - try to give an example of each that you can link to your life. It does not matter if you cannot link all 10 as this may help you find a focus on where you can further develop.

### Why is important to study it?

Current lifestyles are fast paced and increasingly so, demands for our productivity increase and the drain on resources seems never ending. There are reports of increased isolation, stress and materialism and decreased empathy ( Quinn, 2017). In contrast, results, so far, from many studies on respondents who have practiced positive psychology interventions indicate that there are individual physical benefits e.g.in pain reduction, increased longevity, improved sleep and immune system, functioning social benefits in improved relationships and connectivity; increased creativity and innovation and community benefits where Scandanavian countries score highest (Diener and Chan 2011). It seems that regularly reflecting and engaging with Positive Psychology Interventions helps open up our outlook and increases our resilience due to positive memory priming. New cells are made within the brain from this emotional change. It can take up to three months to learn a new habit or lifestyle change so the earlier we start the better. It is true that sustaining behaviour change is difficult as our genetic traits and negativity kicks in and this is something to be aware of. Improved sustainability can be made by being adaptable and making short and long term goals that can go with the unfamiliar when the initial ones of best fit begin to lose their thrill.

## Neuroplasticity

More knowledge surrounding how the brain works has been carried out in the last fifteen years than any other time through the use of technology and the study of neuroscience. The latest revelations may yet be revised but current research shows the brain is neuroplastic, that is it has an ability to change its physical structure by rewiring and growing new circuits so that optimism and pessimism can be purposely developed (Maguire 2011) so by choosing to practice looking for things that are going right as opposed to what is going wrong the ability to increase positivity is possible.

## Mental Health Nurses and Leadership

The work situation is a constant source of triggers for expression of our negative and positive emotions as it is often a highly charged arena adapting to crisis situations. Working in teams facilitates learning of the world through shared understanding of the consequences and contexts in which emotions are played out. A survey carried out by Virgin Pulse (2015) highlighted that 40% of respondents cited good relationships with work colleagues as the main reason they enjoyed their job. These connections have the power to change the way we think and therefore increasing the positive emotions in daily work life can counter effect the malicious effects of anxiety and negativity often shown.

‘Tend and befriend’ is a term used by Taylor et al. (2000) to mirror the saying of ‘fight or flight’ shedding transformational understanding of how people handle challenges by joining

forces and supporting each other. As cortisol and adrenalin trigger the former it is oxytocin that underlies the latter by inhibiting the amygdala , reducing fear and thereby increasing empathy and promoting social bonding. It is evidenced in studies that relate to maternal bonding , monogamous relationships, and improved social relationships so it is clear that In order to have satisfying relationships at work oxytocin plays a key role in increasing feelings of calmness and contentment (Lieberman, 2013).

It is beneficial to look at including as many opportunities as possible to engage in positive social connections, have breaktimes away from the computer, go for a walk outside the building, show gratitude to co-workers (Emmons, 2007) , share appropriate humour , highlight good events, reminisce about pleasant memories and be present with others – talk not email. Enticott et al. (2008) have discovered that our moods are contagious and if a colleague is celebrating next to us our brain cells fire up in similar behaviour. This in turn enhances the part of the brain that deals with creativity and as trust is developed people begin to feel safer and less defensive.

Maybe the biggest theft of these opportunities is our increasing reliance on the computer. The use of information technology is critical to our work lives and ever present in our personal life. This is here to stay and the idea that it frees us up to communicate with others more on a face to face daily basis is not evident. We may often email colleagues in another room or text upstairs to members of our family rather than interact on a personal basis. This is coupled with the evidence that behaviour patterns show people over check emails and phone messages far more than is required due to experiencing the effects of a powerful transmitter in the form of dopamine (Kaeun et al. 2018). This anticipation of information and

checking in – whether the information maybe positive or negative - is more rewarding than reading the message. This behaviour can transcend awareness that others comment on it or the person is aware of the dependency as activating the high received from dopamine which can be so addictive as we keep hoping to find something more interesting or useful.

### *ACTIVITY 3*

Honestly monitor your phone use and see how many minutes/hours a day you use it. What are the sites you go to? Are you aware of any feelings of discomfort experienced if you do not have your phone to hand? Would you be able to decide not to check in as often as you do or decide not to take any action for a full two minutes so you can experience the sensations that accompany the urge and increase your control over your behaviour?

Our self- talk influences our image which influences our behaviour. The best way to break negativity is to change it to positivity to increase engagement in the place where we probably spend more of our waking hours than anywhere else with new connections as well as strengthen old ones (Seligman, 2011).The increased focus on key performance indicators and other targets can be draining and relentless but may also be sources of intrinsic motivation and accomplishment. In order to sustain this enjoying the steps of the process is key. Given that studies highlight we are flourish when using our strengths it seems to be obvious that we balance the necessary criticism and corrections with many more opportunities to give praise and focus on achievements and rewards no matter how small (Fredrickson, 2013).

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) discovered that teams are at their best when they are absorbed in the task, experience control of their actions and demonstrate competence. This creativity comes from collaboration and networking to resolve problems creatively. 'Happiness' in teams is enhanced if its members skills match the tasks to be taken and that timely, constructive feedback is given often. Team leaders can optimise this by sharing the collective goal and making sure it is understood and listened to. Moving it forward as opposed to negating or ignoring suggestions is critical to success and people feeling that they are valued. Positive appreciation of everyone's individual skills and strengths helps cohesion and forms strong identities and reduces overdeveloped egos. The fair distribution of work makes for group satisfaction as does stability of the team members in keeping with the familiarity of routine and communication between work mates. It may be stating the obvious but contingency plans and support for when things do not go as expected are worth their emotional weight in gold. The most effective teams listen closely to each other, communicate openly and share successes and failures and with that comes innovation, creativity, satisfaction and 'happiness'.

## Conclusions

The storyline of positive psychology continues to be written with many viewpoints complementing or providing interesting and dissonant contrasts. This is vital to incite healthy discussion and ensure findings are scrutinised to allow embedding of valid and reliable results in the scientific arena. This article allows the reader to gain an awareness of some of the key points in positive psychology today and remind themselves it is also perfectly acceptable to

be sceptical ( although not cynical) as this keeps further debate ongoing and inspires open thinking in and out of the box. This article focussed mainly on the workplace but the skills gained are transferable to education, recreation and home-life in releasing the actual from the potential with new thinking skills on self-talk and improved self-image. The mechanisms that potentiate the release of certain neurotransmitters and hormones that link to brain downtime, incite our innermost anxieties and their roles in improving our ability to support each other and represents a small part of the discoveries about the brain and how it influences well-being. Applying them to our lives may be the best way of reaping the rewards we deserve as individuals and for our communities. At least we can commit to giving it a chance – what have we got to lose?

### **Keywords**

- Positive Psychology
- Happiness
- Seligman
- PERMA
- Neuroplasticity

### **Key points**

1. Positive psychology is an umbrella term for the recent expansion of the scientific study of wellbeing
2. Happiness is a difficult concept to define as it is so subjective

3. The potential to increase positivity lies within individual choice
4. Neuroplasticity is the ability of the brain to adapt to circumstances
5. Awareness of increasing opportunities for social connections in teams will increase happiness at work and create more effective teams

### **Reflective Questions**

#### *Reflection 1*

There are numerous definitions of happiness. Feel free and write down what your definition is. Now think what about what has guided you to that decision. Consider if your definition will change or remain static in the future.

#### *Reflection 2*

Think about what makes you happy – it might be people, places or activities – and make a list. Reflect on how these are meaningfully included in your life or note the factors blocking them. How could you change this?

#### *Reflection 3*

Look back on the events of the last week and identify 3 good/happy things you have experienced and write them down. Share them with a partner/colleague and observe their expressions and listen to their comments. Consider how you now feel after connecting with someone. Ask them to repeat the exercise for extra effect. Plan how you can practice sharing 3 good things on a daily basis as opposed to focussing on the negative.

#### *Reflection 4*

Imagine you are in close physical contact with a person you **truly love**. Visualise yourself hugging them and experiencing the strongest connection with them and feel the care and comfort you both share in your mind. Now pay attention to the reaction in your body as oxytocin begins to work its magic as the 'cuddle hormone' kicks in. Enjoy the sensation and uplifting effects of this. Consider how could you practice this positive action more often to nurture other healthy relationships? This mechanism also works when we imagine being close to people or in fantasy so be mindful of its usage!

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## BOXES

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